

Hi Sean,

Sorry for the late response, but hopefully my contribution will be helpful to you!

Thank you so much for leading this fabulous tour to China! (Although China was not on my "bucket list", I am so happy I joined!) You ensured that we saw and experienced all the important and noted sights in the four cities we visited, eg: the Forbidden City, Olympic Park, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall, the Terra Cotta warriors, silk making and silk embroiderers, the impressive Shanghai museum, Jade Buddha Temple, the Art Museum, the Jewish Museum, etc., etc. etc! The evening boat ride, the Rick Shaw ride, walking around the old city, special parks, and on and on! Our days were packed with sights and unique Chinese entertainments, excellent meals (thank you for accommodating my special vegetarian and GF diet!). You showed us everyday life for the Chinese, such as bike rentals, excellent grocery store, taxi hailing and modern underground transportation! And amidst ensuring that we missed nothing of importance, you somehow were able to deftly bring a group of 11 individuals, including 4 couples and 3 singles, who had not known each other, into a "friend group" in which we all took pleasure in the company of each other. And through it all, you aptly educated us on the culture of the country and demonstrated some of the advantages as well as the some of the challenges faced in this communist government.

The hotels were A+, the meals delicious, the tour guides knowledgeable, fluent in English and seemed to enjoy our company! All of it supported a most memorable trip! Thank you very much for all you did to make this trip so special.

Ellie H.

Before we saw the announcement for the 2024 UD VIP China trip, travel to China hadn't been on our priority list. But the more we perused the itinerary, we thought we'd be crazy not to take advantage of what seemed to be the trip of a lifetime. Indeed, it was.

Sean Gao and his UD team advertised and delivered an incomparable VIP experience. Everything about the trip from the pre-travel planning and preparation to transportation arrangements and accommodations to the details of each stop along the way was finely curated. Touring logistics were quite complex, but Sean and his helpers made it look easy. We were spoiled!

Of course, visits to iconic sites like the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Terracotta Warriors and the Shanghai Bund were must-sees and they did not disappoint. In addition, Sean and our local tour guides arranged more personal experiences that connected us with Chinese art and culture, history, and the daily life of the Chinese people. Lectures by Sean, his wife, UD faculty member Renee Dong, and special guest Dvir Bar-Gal enhanced our appreciation for and understanding of what we were seeing.

And food. We experienced an amazing array of local and regional cuisines. Each meal was delectable and distinctive and provided an opportunity to learn about places and foodways far from where we visited.

And what a delight it was to share our experience with a smart, fun and harmonious group of fellow travelers. We each came to this UD adventure via a different path: alums, parents of alums, Osher Lifelong Learning members, and Master Players Concert attendees came together for this extraordinary experience. We made new friends and we strengthened our relationship to the University. We also met some UD grads living in China and got to spend time with YouDee who was in all our group photos!

Susan and Charles S.

November 3, 2024

Dear University of Delaware Leadership,

As long-time University of Delaware and Master Player Concert Series (MPCS) supporters we were thrilled when we were finally able to travel with Professor Sean Gao on the UD Alumni & Friends 2024 trip to China. We are appreciative of the support that the University continues to provide for this adventurous cultural exchange.

Many years ago (now) retired UD Professor Pat Tanner Nelson strongly encouraged Kris to be sure to hear violinist Xiang Gao. We (one-time violist and trumpeter) did and were enthralled. Through the MPCS performances we got to “know” Sean as the MPCS director and host, oft-time violinist, and 6-WIRE ensemblist. We knew he was cool under pressure. Who wouldn’t want to travel with him?

Having the trip planned and led by bilingual / bicultural educator(s) Sean (and Renée Dong) made all the difference. We thoroughly enjoyed the many beautiful historic cities, sites, and museums, but perhaps even more valuable were the cultural experiences, planned and impromptu, seeing everyday life unfold – and living it whenever possible. (Sean made this a priority.) These experiences included but were not limited to the following.

- We were introduced to and used Chinese apps (e.g., WeChat and DiDi Ride Hailing) to communicate, pay vendors and call a taxi.
- We navigated the Beijing subway, high speed train from Shanghai to Suzhou, the maglev train and a handful of airports.
- We visited a fascinating grocery store with a wide array of familiar and unfamiliar baked goods, fresh and dried fish and meats, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Among the most unusual was a display of live silk pupae.
- We visited street vendors in Beijing, Xi’An, Shanghai and Suzhou selling everything from antiques to squid.
- We participated in a tea ceremony.
- We learned about the cultivation of silkworms, spinning and weaving silk.
- We observed everyday life within the Hutong neighborhood of Beijing (via rickshaw and walking tours) and along the canals on our boat ride in Suzhou.
- We visited with a family living in the Hutong (courtyard neighborhood) in a multi-generational home.

- We watched expert embroiderers and weavers create masterpieces large and small.
- We walked the Shanghai Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees (Shanghai Ghetto) with a Jewish history expert and toured the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum with its director learning about the refugees' life in occupied China.
- We appreciated the good humor of our Beijing, Xi'An and Shanghai/Suzhou guides – and learned a bit about their lives.
- We visited with children, teens and adults who wanted to share their thoughts and practice their English. Including well-informed folks who knew Biden was from Delaware!
- We were welcomed to the lovely Beijing apartment of retired meteorologists - the Dongs (Renée's parents).
- We encountered young and old dressed in exquisite traditional garb and everyday clothes who were happy to pose for photos – including a smiling grandmother in a long embroidered red dress, head piece and fan in the Forbidden City, a sweet mother and daughter pair in matching long pink beaded dresses and flowered head pieces at the Summer Palace, a young women in a Mosque wearing a lovely cream and blue outfit flashing a peace sign as she posed with a bamboo cage containing a seemingly contented dove, a father and daughter on a motorbike and so many more at museums, gardens and markets.
- We developed what we hope will be enduring friendships with our fellow UD travelers.
- And last, but not least the hardiest among us Karl (and others) experienced steak sandwich take out delivery by drone to a high tower on the Great Wall through Chinese food delivery giant, Meituan, founded by former UD student Xing Wang.

Many thanks again for your support of this endeavor – please feel free to contact us if you would like to hear more about the wonders of Sean and Renée, their colleagues, and our recent trip.

All the very best,

Karl and Kris B.

Dear Professor Gao,

We have been home for two weeks from the U of D Master Players 2024 trip to China. Every day we think of another memorable moment from this trip of a lifetime. Any preconceived ideas about what China would be like were shattered. The cities we visited amazed us in the use of architecture and technology, creating amazingly modern urban areas. While building for the future, so much of the ancient, historic culture was simultaneously engrained in the newness, allowing China to look toward to the future while remembering its past. The Chinese we meet were very welcoming and wanted to make sure we enjoyed our visit to their country.

What made the trip so enjoyable and educational was your unique leadership, planning and commentary as our tour leader. Because of your deep understanding of the American and Chinese cultures and people, you shared insights that a typical tourist would not have experienced. By exposing us to the full range of Chinese history and life today, we were able to appreciate the complexities of today's China. From a historical perspective, you led us to the Forbidden City, ancient temples, the Terracotta Warriors, a silk factory, a rickshaw ride through an old section of a city, and several important museums, including one memorializing the Jewish experience in Shanghai during WW II that sparked the genesis for your musical "Shanghai Sonatas" For a modern contrast, you exposed us to the 2018 Olympic park, travelling on a bullet and a magnetic levitating (Maglev) train, riding new subway systems, visiting the homes of a professional couple and an extended working class family, viewing a city from the top of a skyscraper, and admiring ultra-modern skylines.

You also shared with us your passion for music and the arts during our trip. Based on your comments and attending several theatrical shows, we appreciated how the arts can bridge the Chinese and American cultures and people. You also ensured we had excellent guides in each city who went the extra mile to make our visits memorable and safe. The hotels were top notch and the food was amazing. Part of the fun was finding out you were a serious 'foodie'. You made a point of exposing us to as many styles of regional Chinese cooking as possible. Just when we thought we ate the best food possible, we visited another amazing restaurant where it felt like we didn't leave until we tasted every dish on the menu! By the end of our trip, we mastered how to share food on a gigantic turntable in the center of a dining table and the art of using chopsticks (to varying degrees of success).

Given its small, friendly group of travelers and superb itinerary, we highly recommend this trip to any traveler who has ever wondered what China is all about. With you in charge, there is no doubt this trip is incredibly worthwhile.

Best regards,

Leo and Terry F. (UD Class of '80)

August 3, 2024

It is my pleasure to write a letter of support for the Master Players China VIP trip. We heard about the trip through UD emails and were motivated to go on the trip with our sons and their grandfather who had traveled to Asia during his career with the DuPont Company. Our travel group included my husband, Steve (BChE '77), Steve's father, our sons - Steven (Civil Engineer '11) and Gregory (BChE '13), our brother-in-law (Mechanical Engineer '84) and sister-in-law (Education '85) and our nephew (Business '05). We traveled to Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou and Xian from June 15 - 28, 2015. Our family represented eight of the twenty-five people on the trip. It was a wonderful first-class experience for all of us. In preparation, Professor Gao facilitated the process of getting travel visas. He and his wife, Associate Professor Renee Dong, were experienced guides and were supported by local guides, as needed. The accommodations and the restaurants were excellent. We received an appreciation of the history, culture, geography, politics and food as we traveled from city to city. The itinerary was the right balance of guided tours and free time to explore.

We had one unplanned event that was handled perfectly. My nephew was unable to connect with us due to weather in Chicago and arrived a day late in Beijing. As such, he missed the group trip to The Great Wall. Professor Gao immediately found a local guide to take him to The Great Wall on an alternate day.

During the trip, we became friends with Professor Gao and his wife and spoke about his vision for bringing diverse, global quality musical experiences to the University of Delaware campus. I have been involved with the College of Engineering Advisory Councils (College, Chemical Engineering, and Biomedical Engineering) and with the University of Delaware Alumni Association. When Professor Gao asked if I was interested in joining the Master Players Council, it was easy to say yes. I believe in the mission of the Masters Players to bring unique talent to the University campus and to the local Newark community. The programs are priced at a point where they are affordable to students and the community, and they support the University to provide a cultural offering which is not available in any other venue between Philadelphia (where we live) and Newark. The concerts are well attended, and the Council members often have the opportunity after the concert to get to know the artists over dinner.

I recommend the Master Players China VIP trip opportunity and participation on the Council to anyone. The trip provides a unique perspective from Professors Gao and Dong who grew up in China, but are able to view the country from a

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Western perspective. Additionally, Professor Gao is a professional, engaging, creative mind with a diverse network of artists across a spectrum of musical genres. I believe that the Master Players concerts attract a new set of potential donors and friends of the University.

Regards,

*Linda J. M* (UD BChE '77) (UPenn Wharton MBA '81)

Former President, UD Alumni Association ('19 - '21) Chair, College of Engineering Advisory Council Member, Biomedical Engineering Advisory Council Member, Master Players Advisory Council

In 2008 my wife, Dorothy and I participated in the UD Alumni & Friends China Trip led by Professor Xiang Gao and his wife Professor Renee Dong... the year that the Summer Olympics were held in China.

It was a very well-organized trip. Xiang and Renee assisted our group with all facets of travel, from helping us obtain visas and arranging air transportation to guiding us on private vans through various cities and cultural sites in China. Xiang and Renee were wonderful and knowledgeable hosts, choosing excellent hotels and restaurants for our group. They were cognizant of the dietary and physical needs of each participant and made sure that everyone was accommodated. We made many new university friends on the trip. We all agreed this was an exceptional way to learn about China. When we returned, many of our group made contributions to the Golden Pig Fund, a scholarship program at the University of Delaware. We have recommended the trip to many of our friends. When I went on the China trip, I became interested in the work that Xiang Gao has been doing to promote the University of Delaware through trips (such as the one that I went on), educational outreach (the Backstage Pass program and Little Masters Project) and through the Master Players Concert Series. I have been serving on the Advisory Council of the Master Players for several years and am proud to contribute to this program.

Stuart S., former UD VP for student life

Xiang Gao is the consummate cultural ambassador, whether it's through his music or his cultural trips to China. I have traveled twice to China with Xiang and experienced first-hand his generosity and his efforts to foster greater understanding and appreciation between people, in this case between the Chinese and the Americans. His unbounding enthusiasm is contagious and you can't help but feel better about the world when traveling with Xiang. Upon our return from our first trip to China, he asked me if I would consider joining the council as a board member. I would walk on hot coals for Xiang. Yes, I replied with alacrity, while at the same time wondering if I would be outed for having negligible musical talent. It is true that Xiang believes, with all his heart, in the power of music to be healing and to bring people together. He is the ultimate collaborator and forges bonds with musicians, with clothing designers, with poets, graphic designers, and with ordinary people. His collaborations transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. I would highly recommend a trip to China with Xiang Gao because it provides an in-depth look at another culture with whom we have often had adversarial relations and makes you a believer in the power of music to transcend borders.

The UD China Trip we attended in June 2014 was a seminal event in our lives. Our youngest child traveled with Karen and I and the experience completely changed the direction of her interests and studies. She then enrolled in Chinese language classes at UD as part of her homeschool curriculum.

For us, it was the first time we traveled out of the country together. It had the potential to be nerve wracking. We felt well taken care of in the hands of Xiang and Renee. The trip was perfectly designed to give us authentic experiences and a deep dive into Chinese history and culture. We avoided tourist traps and had free time to explore in Beijing and Shanghai. Our travel companions became our friends. The experience reflected the high quality we expect from University of Delaware.

Personally, The trip helped me to see and learn and here more about Xiang Gao. He inspired me to be a leader, along side him, in the pursuit of providing great musical experiences through Master Players. I was a fan of the series from almost its inception and would regularly attend concerts. But the trip; Xiang's kindness and generosity in sharing the best of China, helped my decision to become an avid supporter of the series and UD with my time, talent and treasure.

And it is an experience I have recommended to my friends and customers. It is wonderful to be able to make a personal introduction to Xiang at a MPCS event and then see a friend go to China, return, and become season ticket holders for the series.